

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Some lessons from Proverbs: A lesson for women

Today we come to the last in our present series of four talks looking at the book of Proverbs. In our series entitled "Some lessons from Proverbs", we have considered:

- "A lesson in humility";
- "A lesson in trust"; and
- "A lesson in finance".

The title for today's talk is, "A lesson for women" and we will be taking a closer look at Proverbs 31:10-31.

I suppose our title could just as well have been "A lesson from a woman", as in these verses we find a beautiful display of so many commendable and praiseworthy features. As I thought about these verses, and the subject of the "virtuous woman", I have to say that I have never heard these verses spoken about except at the funeral services of godly women. That is quite sad really as we read at the end of the chapter that "*the virtuous woman*" (Proverbs 31:10) is worthy of praise, and I would think that should be during her lifetime and not just after she has died.

I don't suppose virtuous is a word we commonly use today, so we perhaps need to explore the meaning. The Oxford Dictionary gives the definition of virtuous as, "having or showing high moral standards." The Chambers Dictionary adds, "excellence; worth moral excellence; the practice of duty; a good quality; blameless; righteous" and so on. It carries the thought, too, of power and strength, and noble and of value. If you read through the passage from Proverbs 31:10-31 you will get a picture in words of what a virtuous woman is. We hope to pick out some of the features which mark the virtuous woman as we continue this talk. These words (originally spoken by Lemuel's mother see Proverbs 31:1) are in Holy Scripture and give us God's thoughts concerning a virtuous woman. I'm not sure we can be certain of who Lemuel was, but his mother certainly was both able and willing to give him good advice. So even before we get into the main passage, we have a lesson for women: don't be shy in giving good advice to your children and to younger ones over whom you have influence.

In our passage (Proverbs 31:10-31), the primary lesson for women is to display the features of the virtuous woman. If praise is desired or looked for, that won't do - but we read in Proverbs 31:30 that, "*A woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised.*" Her praises are first heard within the family; her children bless her and her husband praises her, but it doesn't stop there. The last verse says, "*Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates*" (Proverbs 31:31). The virtuous woman is worthy of both private and public recognition for what she is and what she does. Perhaps we need to pause here for a moment and ask ourselves whether we really are thankful and appreciative of the godly women who have had an influence in our lives!

In our first verse (Proverbs 31:10), the question is asked, "*Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.*" We know rubies are rare and precious, so too is the virtuous woman! But who is this woman? Is she real? Can any wife and mother be everything this woman is? I'm sorry if my answer is feeble, but I don't know.

The book begins, "*The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding...*" (Proverbs 1:1-2). Although Solomon was a wise man, it has been suggested that perhaps rather than being the author he was the compiler, writing down known proverbs and arranging them in the order preserved for his people and also for us, in the Scriptures. We have become used to thinking of Proverbs as wise instructions for a happy and purposeful life, and so they are! In our previous talks we have seen just how practical the lessons are for us as Christians - the people of God in our generation.

What I do find interesting is that the last two chapters in the book of Proverbs are very different, in style and content to the other twenty nine. The first seven chapters are addressed to 'sons' and the instructions and warnings contained in the following chapters are addressed to men, especially the young men. Women are hardly spoken of throughout the book (except in warnings against strange women, prostitutes and adulterers etc.) but here at the very end, all the wise instructions and teaching are displayed in the virtuous woman. I wonder then if this is a 'real' woman after all or if it is not rather the pattern for all godly women to aspire to.

So perhaps the second lesson for women is not to become despondent if they feel they cannot be this perfect wife and mother, this virtuous woman. Truly the bar is set at a high level in Proverbs 31:10-31, but this is so there might be exercise to be like her, not exhaustion trying to be her! Remember, she is very rare, just like rubies!

This virtuous woman has a husband (read Proverbs 31:11), children and servants (Proverbs 31:15) and a successful business (Proverbs 31:13-14 and 16). So does that mean that the unmarried woman, without children etc. cannot be virtuous? I think not. Surely there are many examples, in the Scriptures and from our own experience of women who had neither husbands nor children but who were worthy of this accolade. Think of Deborah, Rebekah's nursemaid or of Esther who, although she was married to King Ahasuerus, had no children that we read of. In the New Testament we read of Mary of Bethany and Martha, her sister, and Dorcas (to name but three). Were they all not virtuous women? My first Sunday school teacher and great encourager to so many was an elderly spinster: never married and no natural children, but a true 'mother in Israel'. In her book *"Faith with Fortitude"* (ISBN 9780958339292) the missionary, Beryl Harris tells her life story. She writes, "When I left Sydney in 1946 as an idealistic 25 year-old with fresh nursing and midwifery qualifications, heading for the mission field in Belgian Congo, little did I know what lay before me. Perhaps it was just as well! But as I now look back after some 18 separate visits spread over 60 years, I can only thank my Lord for all that He has brought me through." No husband, no natural children, or business but just think of the many whom she has blessed and who rise up and call her blessed. Truly a virtuous woman!

Lesson three then (if you're counting) is to live the life God has given you. We are all different and have unique opportunities to serve the Master. The children's chorus says,

*"Jesus bids us shine...
You in your small corner and I in mine."*

Susan B Warner (1819-1885)

So although all the verses in Proverbs 31:10-31 might not directly apply to you at the present time, the teaching of them can still be applied in a personal way, to your unique circumstances.

In Proverbs 31:11 we read that her husband can have full confidence in the virtuous woman to be the wife who provides everything he needs. In the next verse, Proverbs 31:12, we read, *"She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life."* He trusts in her and she faithfully rewards that trust. Her goodness towards him is for life; a lifetime commitment! In a day when marriage break-up is common place, it's good to remind ourselves of the lifelong commitment we made to our spouse when we took our marriage vows. Lesson number four is faithfulness.

In the next few verses, Proverbs 31:13-19, the virtuous woman is described in pictures using lovely poetic language. She is both industrious and intelligent. In an attempt to summarise these verses using words which begin with the same letter, I came up with: Endeavour, Enterprise and Energy; or Diligence, Desire and Discipline, if you prefer. In Proverbs 31:13-14 we find that this woman is not scared of hard work! She works *"willingly with her hands"* and obviously will go to great lengths to provide for her family and friends. *"She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar."* Surely this shows that she wants the very best and will go to great lengths to find it in order to provide for those she loves. How far will we as parents, both fathers and mothers, go to ensure our children get what is good for them? Of course, we're not just thinking about their natural food; we are thinking about what is good for them spiritually. In my teenage years, I remember a Christian couple who travelled two hours in their car every Sunday night so their son could be with Christian company of his own age. I'm sure it would have been easier and less trouble to stay at home, but they wanted the best for their family. The lesson of the virtuous woman would challenge us in relation to our diligence and our desires for those in our spiritual care.

I am reminded of a few lines of poetry by Edgar Guest (1881-1959):

*"I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;
And the best of all preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs."*

How true these sentiments are, and what a challenge to us all!

In Proverbs 31:15 we read that the virtuous woman is also disciplined. *"She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens."* We have considered her diligence and her desires for her family but here we find she is self-disciplined. This virtuous woman manages her time well, and I understand that the

thought of giving a *“portion to her maidens”* (Proverbs 31:15) could mean that she has an organised, thought out plan for the day and delegates this to her servants. Delegation, there's another 'D' for you!

Throughout the book of Proverbs, slothfulness and sluggishness have been warned against. Poverty and ruin come to those who are slothful and lack understanding, choosing to do nothing with their days. What a contrast we have here with this virtuous woman. There is not a lazy bone in her body; never enough hours in the day as she keeps busy from morning till night. She's not just busy, she is prosperous. Proverbs 31:16 tells us that she considers her investments, what she will buy, and also what she will do with the proceeds. *“She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms”*, perhaps not language we are familiar with but surely the image is of energy and power. You'll remember in Exodus, that those who ate the Passover lamb were to have their loins girded in readiness for the journey they were about to make. Even the clothes this woman wore spoke of her diligence to work and to achieve her desires. *“Her candle goeth not out by night”* (Proverbs 31:18). I doubt if that means that this hardworking woman never slept! Sleep is essential for good health and so I would take it that while the poor could not afford to keep candles burning during the night as they slept, this woman could afford to, not that she was indifferent to the poor as we will see in the next few verses.

As well as providing for her own, in Proverbs 31:20 we read, *“She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.”* Perhaps, and it's only my own thought, the stretched out hand is financial help and the hands reached forth is practical help. John Wesley is reported to have said, “The last part of a man to be converted is his wallet”. This virtuous woman gladly gave of her substance but also of her time and skills to those less fortunate than her. As Christians, surely we should be marked with kindness and compassion, ready to give and willing to lend a practical hand too.

Proverbs 31:21-22 bring us back to the thoughts of this woman's home and her children being blessed by her. She has no fear of hard times (which are sure to come just as the snow in winter) as she is prepared, and has provided warm clothing and a comfortable home for her family. *“Her clothing is silk and purple”* (Proverbs 31:22). I think this tells us something about this woman's spirit and her manner. We have seen from the earlier verses that this woman is not 'high maintenance' for her husband; in fact her husband has not been mentioned since Proverbs 31:11 of our passage. She is not the kind of woman who is obsessed by her outward appearance and looks, but *“her clothes are silk and purple.”* Proverbs 31:22. In the Bible, garments speak of character and the silk and purple this woman wore speaks of royalty and splendour.” Lydia was a seller of purple (Acts 16:14). The Lord was arrayed in a purple robe (although this was in mockery), nevertheless it was because He was being tried as the King of the Jews (see Mark 15:20, John 19:2). The scarlet and purple garments give us a picture of the splendour of this woman and the atmosphere of her home. I'm sure the atmosphere of this home was loving and caring, just like the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany, where the Lord was always welcome. I could well imagine that this woman was a generous hostess, hospitable and friendly. Visitors would feel at home in her house. I'm sure we've lost count but there is lesson after lesson for women in this passage!

As I said, her husband is not mentioned in Proverbs 31:11-23, and I wonder why that is? Can I suggest it is because of the confidence and trust he has in her! He doesn't need to oversee what she is doing; he knows that he can get on with his work knowing that she has taken care of the children and the home. Evidently he has a public office, for he is *“known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land”* (Proverbs 31:23). This man was blessed with a virtuous wife and because of her unflinching support, he was able to hold a position of leadership and authority in Israel. Well might he praise her, as he does in Proverbs 31:28!

In Proverbs 31:24 to 27 we see a more public side to this virtuous woman. She is not always a 'stay at home wife and mother'; she trades her fine linen and speaks words of wisdom and kindness. What she sells is valuable and the advice she gives is valuable! This woman is consistent in private and in public. She is a credit to her husband and a help to any who benefit from her wise words of experience. Perhaps she is older now (and I will come back to that in a moment). The Apostle Paul has words for the older women as he writes to Titus. In Titus 2:3-5 we read, *“The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, nor given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.”* These instructions given *“that the word of God be not blasphemed”* perhaps don't appeal to all women today, but as the people of God and as a wider society, we are the poorer for that. Undoubtedly, one of Satan's schemes is to blur the distinctions between men and women and their particular roles in the church and in society generally. Men and women are equal before God, but in His Word He has given distinct instructions for both (male and female) which we will follow, if we are wise! I don't want to digress, but suffice to say that where we have disobedience in respect of God's divine order between the sexes, there is sure to be trouble. This is bad enough for those who deny God's existence but inexcusable for those who claim to be Christians.

A vital part of being a mother (and father too) is discipline. This is quite contrary to the prevailing views in our society today, but an undisciplined child is an unloved child. Surely we do our children no favour if we feel we cannot say “no”

and from time to time restrict what they do. Of course, that won't always mean that we are the 'best mum' (or dad) in their eyes and in anger they may say terrible things. But being a good parent is not a popularity contest! How often have we heard, "Billy's dad lets him do that" or "Sarah's mum lets her go there". We might not be liked by our children if we stop them from doing things and going places we think will be detrimental for them, but that is our responsibility. The children of this virtuous woman "*rise up, and call her blessed*" (Proverbs 31:28) but I wonder if that was always the case. I'm sure we disagreed and thought our parents were wrong when we were young, but as we grew up we took a different view. So take courage if you are at that difficult stage in your experience with your children. If our children are assured of our love and our concern for their physical and spiritual wellbeing, I believe in God's time they will rise up and bless us. Remember chastening is the product of love. We read of God's chastening, because He loves us, in Hebrews 12:5-11.

Well, we have come to the end of our talk and I do trust there have been some lessons for women, but also for us men. How nice it is to see that this virtuous woman is not only praised by her children and her husband but also by all those who knew her. It may be that some of the circumstances of the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31 are very far removed from your personal circumstances. But whatever those circumstances might be, so long as you seek to please the Lord in those circumstances, that will gain His approval.

We will close by quoting Proverbs 31:30, "*Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised.*"

May God bless you all.

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